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ON THE FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE TALISHIS IN AZERBAIJAN REPUBLIC

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General Remarks

Since the ancient times, the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic has been within the boundaries of the Iranian cultural world, as a part of various Iranian state formations. The Iranian traditions dominated here until the early 19th century.

Following the inclusion of that territory into the Russian Empire, Russia more or less openly adopted a policy aimed at extricating that region out from under the influence of Iran. By doing so, the Russian authorities directly or indirectly contributed to the emergence and proliferation of a new, Turkic identity, which—in contrast to the old, confession-based, one—was rooted in secular values, such as, in particular, the common language. Consequently, already during that period, many representatives of the Iranian-speaking peoples living inside the future Azerbaijan Republic either began concealing their Iranian origins or were gradually assimilated. These assimilation processes were especially speedy for the so-called Muslim Tats (self-designation, Pars) and the Kurds. Another Iranian-speaking people—the Talishis—even though were subjected to some extent of assimilation, have retained their identity. In terms of ethnic self-expression, Talishis today are the most active Iranian-speaking minority in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Presently, there are compact groups of the Talishi population in the south-western regions of the Azerbaijan Republic: Lenkoran (Pers. Lankorān, in Talishi Lankon), Lerik, Masally, Astara, and Yardymly. However, in modern times, many Talishis also live in urban areas, predominately in the cities of Baku, Sumgait, etc. Another part of Talishis live in the Talish district in Iran. Talishis of the Azerbaijan Republic are mostly Shi'ites (with the exception of the inhabitants of some 25 mountainous villages), while Iranian Talishis are for the most part Sunnis.

According to the 1894 census, 88,449 Talishis lived in the south-western regions of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic. In the Soviet period, however, under the so-called "title nations enlargement" policy, the number of Talishis had been artificially reduced. Given the traditionally high birth rate among the Talishis, the one million figure seems to realistically represent the number of Talishis currently living in the Republic of Azerbaijan.¹ On the other hand, of course, in Soviet times, most Talishis were registered as Azeris. Many distinguished Talishis of that period were known as Azerbaijanis.

The raise of the ideology of Turkism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, as expressed in the famous formula *bir millet, iki dövlət* ("one nation, two states", implying here Turkey and Azerbaijan), was among the catalyst factors for the increasing Iranian identity of the Talishis who have always opposed themselves to the Turkic world.

The culmination of this initial stage of the Talishi Movement was the proclamation of the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijani Republic in 1993 in the south-west of Azerbaijan Republic.

On 21 June 1993, a group of military officers led by a field commander during the Karabakh war, Colonel Ali Akram Hummatov,² announced the establishment of the Talish-Mughan Republic covering the area of seven south-western districts of Azerbaijan. On 7 August that same year in Lenkoran the founding session of the People's Mejlis of the Talish-Mughan Republic took place, where deputies from the seven district Soviets unanimously proclaimed the creation of the Talish-Mughan Republic. At the same session, the President of the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijani Republic, Ali Akram Hummatov, and the Chairman of the People's Mejlis were elected; the Constitutional Law was adopted; the national anthem, the flag, and some other state attributes were approved. The leaders of the autonomous republic demanded from the Azeri authorities to summon an extra session of the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan to vote on the proclamation of the Talish-Mughan Republic. Still, on 24 August 1993, the Republic ceased to exist.

It should be noted that this was not the first incident when a semi-independent state was formed in the area populated by Talishis. In the late Middle Ages, there existed the Talish Khanate, and the Russian Talish-Mughan Republic was proclaimed in 1919, etc.

¹ See G. Asatrian, "Talyši", *G. Asrian, Etyudy po iranskoj etnologii*, Erevan, 1998: 3-11.

² Alternative spellings: *Alikram*, or *Alakram*, Russian *Gumbatov*. The Talishis themselves prefer the *Ali Akram Hummatov* spelling, while the *Alikram Gumbatov* version is commonly used in the Azerbaijani press.

The idea of proclaiming an autonomous republic was incorporated in the agenda of the Lenkoran branch of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan by Hummatov and the prominent Talishi poet Ali Nasir back in 1989. Back then, Hummatov had been among the leaders of the Popular Front, which he left shortly after the Abulfaz Elchibey's team took over the leadership of that organisation. For a couple of years Hummatov who fought in the Karabakh war, was the commander of the Lenkoran battalion, and then during the course of several months was the Deputy Defense Minister of Azerbaijan.

On 10 July 1993, a meeting between Ali Akram Hummatov and Heidar Aliyev took place in Baku. During the meeting, the President demanded that Hummatov dissolved the Talish-Mughan Autonomous Republic and as a reward promised him a high position in the government. The negotiations between Aliyev and Hummatov lasted 4 hours, but came to nothing. Aliyev had another face-to-face with Hummatov, this time behind closed doors, on 12 August. Once again, the meeting fell short of producing any positive results. For 16-17 August, President Aliyev summoned an extra session of the Mejlis of Azerbaijan, which adopted a resolution calling for the "restoration of public order in the Southern region" in a 3-day time limit. In a televised address on 23 August, Aliyev called the local population to defy the authority of Hummatov, following which he sent to Lenkoran Ministers of the Interior, National Security, and Defence with a number of Special Force units. Having exhausted all his resources and no longer able to resist, Hummatov escaped from the headquarters and went into hiding in the Talishi mountains. Several months later he was arrested in his home.³

Despite the short span of existence of the Talish-Mughan Republic, these events have since then served as a precedent, to which the current Talishi population of Azerbaijan has repeatedly been appealing, while Ali Akram Hummatov, who was released from prison in 2004, has become both the symbol and the actual leader of the Talishi Movement. In this regard, a statement by Hummatov in court on 15 July 2002 is worth quoting here: "*De Jure*, the Talish Mughan Autonomous Republic exists even as of today, and I, who for the past nine years have been serving time, am the President of it".⁴

At present, the nationalist movement of the Talishis in the Azerbaijan Republic must be viewed as a reality. It has many of the "ge-

³ See, for example, <http://talish.narod.ru/hist01.htm> (based on *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*).

⁴ See *Zerkalo*, 16. 07. 2002, and <http://tolishpress.com/cgi-bin/tolish.pl?action=history>.

neric characteristics” of a newly emerged nationalist movement, as well as features typical of a certain stage in the formation of modern national self-consciousness. At the same time, the Talishi Movement can be described as being a quite well organised network of activists in the Diaspora and, partially, in Azerbaijan with an established communication channel between them, which secures an uninterrupted exchange of information and coordinated activities. This network is a kind of a common semantic, symbolic and information field, which although is riddled with lacunae, but nevertheless is a fact of life. Among the major topics being circulated within this common information field are: precision wording and finalisation of the political and national objectives of the movement, issues pertaining to national literary language, as well as the construction of national history. It can be said that in general there is a consensus on these topics. The consensus arises from the fact that there exists a set of symbols serving as a consolidating factor for various flanks of the movement. Such symbols are, first and foremost, the events of 1993 related to the proclamation of the Talish-Mughan Republic, and the persona of Ali Akram Hummatov. The Talish-Mughan Republic and Hummatov’s persona are the two untouchable issues that are never really challenged by the movement activists. These matters also represent the division line between the followers of the Talishi National Movement and its opponents. Among the latter are mostly those Azeris who identify themselves as Turks, even including those in opposition to the ruling regime of the Aliyev clan. The Talishi Movement has representatives in Russia and some other CIS and European countries. It also owns several mass media outlets, both print and electronic, and enjoys a wide coverage on the Internet. The virtual presence of the Talishis on the Net has grown in the past two years both in size and, to some extent, in terms of quality. In 2003, a keyword search on the World Wide Web on Talishis would not turn up anything except a bunch of personal pages hosted on free servers. Since then, however, several Talishi resources of much higher quality have emerged, all with their own domain names. In addition, at least two online Forums dedicated exclusively to the Talishi question, have been operational on the Internet.

As far as the so-called Pars⁵ (Tats) Movement is concerned, although it would be premature to describe it as fully developed, certain

⁵ Not to be confused with the homonymic ethnonym of the Zoroastrians in India (Pars, Parsee). In the present study, “Pars” is the designation preferred by the representatives of the people, usually described in the Soviet ethnographic papers by the name “Muslim Tats”. The representatives of this ethnic group themselves as a rule avoid the term Tat, considering it as a pejorative

intensification has recently been observed here, clearly indicating that it is moving past the “talking” phase. This is best illustrated by the arrival of a new Internet resource *www.shirvan.org*, towards which the Tats’ activists seem to be gravitating. At the present stage, the Pars Movement is practically devoid of any political slogans and symbolism, and the prime focus is on the awakening of the ethnic self-awareness and “cultural illumination”, so to speak. On the other hand, Pars today lack resources to enable them to put forward any political demands or objectives. Their activists and supporters, meanwhile, make their political likes and dislikes quite noticeable. Topping of their agenda is their anti-Turkish and pro-Iranian orientation, and abhorrence for the “Shirvan rule” of the members of the Nakhichevan and Yerevan clans. In this context, the Pars Movement stands quite close to the Talishi Movement. It also has many other specific attributes, which are worth discussing separately.

Regarding the Kurds, at present no organised Kurdish Movement has been observed in Azerbaijan. Kurds are mostly mentioned within the context of allegations of the Kurdish origins of the leaders of the Nakhichevan clan⁶ and some other representatives of the political elite, both in power and in opposition. However, even in the not at all unlikely case of these allegations being substantiated, it would be absurd to speak of Kurdish national self-awareness among these people. These are Turkic-speaking people with matching self-consciousness; while some among them, such as the Musavat leaders and the Gray Wolves, entertain extreme political views.⁷

characteristic (on the term “Tat”, see in detail F. D. Lyuškevič, “Termin *tat* kak etnonim v Srednej Azii, Irane i Zakavkaz’e”, *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, 3(1971): 25-32).

⁶ The so-called Nakhichevan clan usually connotes not just the Aliyev family, but many public and political figures from the opposition camp, who are originally from the Nakhichevan region. Among them was the deceased former president Abulfaz Elchibey (real name Aliyev), who has also been alleged of being of Kurdish extraction.

⁷ Of ardent champions of Turkism in Azerbaijan, the Musavat party boss Isa Gambarov (originally from the Fizuli district), and leader of the Pan-Turkic “Grey Wolves” organisation Iskander Gamidov, are sometimes alleged to be ethnically Kurds. This situation is clearly comparable with that in Turkey, where many Turkish nationalists, from Ziya Gökalp to President Turgut Özal, are every now and then claimed to be of Kurdish descent, which may or may not be true. In general, it should be noted that, being Shi’ites, the Kurds of Azerbaijan Republic have since the 20th century had a constant tendency of assimilation with the Turkic-speaking Azeris. Even in the Azerbaijani enclaves of Armenia, which incorporated also the Shi’ite Kurds, the latter partly were assimilated within their coreligionists.

The Current Stage of the National Movement of the Talishis in Azerbaijan Republic

The Diaspora is the main hub of the Talishi Movement and the chief generator of ideas and principles. We can distinguish two large centres of the Talishi Diaspora: Moscow (and Russia, in general), and the Western Europe, and the Netherlands in the first place, where Ali Akram Hummatov lived since the autumn of 2004. He was released from prison in Azerbaijan under the pressure of European structures. We have almost no knowledge of the existence of a Talishi community in the U.S.

In the print media domain, the principle sources on the Talishi Movement, excluding oral and field materials are the Internet resources.

Following disjointed attempts (spanning from Vilnius to St. Petersburg) to create a Talishi daily during the Perestroyka, today three newspapers exist—*Tolishi Sedo*, *Talishskij Vestnik*, and *Tolysh*. The first one of them, published in three languages (Talishi, Azeri, and Russian) in Baku by the Republican Talish Centre of Culture, is printed irregularly and utilises most of its space for materials in Azeri (a Turkic language). The newspaper's angle is on culture and illumination, it is pointedly apolitical, is printed in Latin letters, which is annoying to most of the readership uncomfortable with reading the Latin script. In recent years, according to the Talishi Diaspora activists, the prestige of the newspaper as an outlet for Talishi aspirations, has greatly suffered. In the news and information department, the *Tolishi Sedo* does not even come close to Azerbaijani newspapers. If it was not for subsidising, the newspaper would have long gone out of business. The second newspaper, the *Talishskij Vestnik*, founded by the Avesta society, is published by Moscow Regional Talishi National-Cultural Autonomy. Printed in two languages—Talishi and Russian—it comes out sporadically (just 15 issues have been published in the past several years) and deals exclusively with cultural and educational matters. The periodical is evidently in dire need of professional journalists. Again, according to the activists of the Movement, this newspaper cannot be at all popular, as it does not cater to the real needs and desires of the Talish people. The *Talishskij Vestnik* is disseminated mostly in Moscow, only randomly elsewhere in the Russian Federation. This newspaper, just like the *Tolishi Sedo* cannot support itself financially and is in constant danger that financing can dry up. The third periodical, the *Tolysh* is published in St. Peterburg, and as mostly a political outlet is banned in Azerbai-

jan and is smuggled there illegally. While being popular among readers, this newspaper, just like the *Talishskij Vestnik*, is understaffed. Because of its opposition to the ruling regime in Azerbaijan, the *Tolysh* is denied free circulation there.

Perhaps the most informative source about the up to date trends and currents in the Talishi Movement is the Internet, especially Russian-language resources created by Talishi activists. Among these resources, one should distinguish between full-fledged sites, developing sites, and simple, yet fascinating in their naiveté, homepages of individual nationalistically inclined Talishis. These resources offer a wide and multi-layered range of material, from the online versions of print media, to news agencies, electronic libraries, and other sources allowing to keep abreast with the “official” point of view of the Talishi Movement on political, national, cultural, historical issues, and learn then news, to forums, where the visitor can witness the birth of ideas and follow in real time the process of emergence and the development of national self-awareness. Beside that, forum discussions and sources in the forms of home pages give one the chance to get to know the “unofficial” part of the inside Talishi discourse, before it has been packaged for mass consumption. The following are some noteworthy Talishi sources on the Internet (among them official and semi-official resources created and maintained by the nationalist movement activists, as well as some typically low quality rarely updated home pages, often replete with typos and bad grammar, regardless of the language they’re composed in, yet appealing thanks to their personal, unabridged content):

www.tolishpress.com, *www.talishica.org*, *www.talishvestnik.boom.ru*,
www.talish-media.narod.ru, *www.atropat.narod.ru*, *www.talish.narod.ru*,
www.talish-Mughanar.narod.ru, *www.talinf.4t.com*, *www.tolish.narod.ru*,
www.tavalesh.com, and *www.talishdili.4t.com*.

The part of the forum, *www.azdiaspora.org*, dedicated specially to Talishis, where the actual discussion process of political and national objectives of the Talishi Movement among the Talishi activists takes place, must also be noted here.

Certain indications allow for the assumption that either Ali Akram Hummatov himself or a close confidant of his post in this forum. The site *www.tolishpress* is basically a unique Talishi news agency covering Talishi, Azeri and the world events viewed through the “looking-glass” of the Talishi Movement. On this site appears the first interview given by Ali Akram Hummatov after his release from prison (24 October 2004). The interview has become somewhat of a constitutive docu-

ment for the Talishi Movement today.⁸ The content of *www.talishica.org* mostly deals with cultural and educational matters, which clearly indicates that the creators of the site deliberately steer clear from political and social issues. This informative site contains some interesting information on the language, ethnography and history of the Talishi people. The site forum is also interesting in that it gives a visitor an opportunity to witness the live process of discussion on issues related to the formation of literary language, the alphabet, the construction of national history and other important elements of national identity. The rest of the sites in the above list are predominantly personal home pages, while the site *www.tavalesh.com* is about Talishis living in Iran.

Based on the above, a brief description can be given of the basic nationalist and political demands being formulated by the Talishi activists, and light can be shed on the process of forging a national identity drawing from discussions devoted to problems of literary language, national history, national-historical mythology and a world outlook including the images of the national Self, national heroes, image of the enemy, and foreign orientations.

By way of illustration of the formulation of political demands, excerpts from the interview given by Ali Akram Hummatov shortly after his release are given below. In the meantime, it should be born in mind that in this interview, Hummatov was targeting the general Azeri audience, and therefore the objectives expressed in it are not exclusively those of the Talishi Movement (and sometimes not Talishi at all), but are more characteristic of the overall opposition movement in Azerbaijan, or, rather, the part of it that is against not only the ruling regime, but also the ideology of Turkism on the whole, distancing itself from the pro-Turkic segment of the opposition, such as Musavat, Grey Wolves, etc.

In his interview, Hummatov lists the following objectives of the broad spectrum of the Azeri opposition, which includes the Talishi Movement:

1. To liberate Azerbaijan from the rule of the authoritarian military-police regime;
2. For the sake of future Azerbaijan to put an end to the feud and ideological disagreement, and join together in a united patriotic alliance. Only such an alliance, by nominating a joint candidate, will be able to win in local, parliamentary and presidential elections;
3. Embarking on a path of democratic resolution of key problems of Azerbaijan will only be possible after the existing military-police re-

⁸ See <http://tolishpress.com/cgi-bin/tolish.pl?action=pview>

gime has been replaced with humane and democratic power, which will need to perform the following tasks:

- a) To build a state of law and civil society;
- b) To liberate Nagorno-Karabakh thereby allowing for the return to their homes of refugees and displaced persons. The Aliyev clan in the 10 years it has been in power has not done anything to free Nagorno-Karabakh, which should be regarded as their greatest crime against the people of Azerbaijan;
- c) To recognise the multiethnic nature of the Azeri state and give each of the nations the right to self-determination. This will include the right to read, write, and receive elementary, middle and higher education in the native language; to have national television and radio broadcasts; to study and advance national history and culture, ancestral traditions and customs. The creation of such a state implies the complete equality of all peoples of the republic in all areas of social life, regardless of their nation, religion or race.⁹

As can be seen from the excerpt, the demand for self-determination was only mentioned in the last point, and in conjunction with all nations of Azerbaijan, rather than Talishis alone. The formula itself is rather vague, as it does not contain a direct reference to autonomy. Understandably, in the interview, Hummatov leaves himself enough room to maneuver. It is interesting how Hummatov himself assesses the current situation and reveals his plans for the future:

The Talishi Movement today is a powerful and well-organised force fighting for the rights and freedoms of all peoples of Azerbaijan; the force to reckon with both inside and out of the republic. Already in Azerbaijan, the government and the opposition alike are taking into consideration a possible reaction to any decision by our movement, as it has become increasingly difficult to muffle (as they did it in the mid-nineties) our voices, which today are being heard in the UN, Council of Europe and other international organisations.

Tolyshpress: Are you thinking of continuing what you once started?

Hummatov: No doubt about it. As I have already said, years of persecutions and pressure, hard prison life did not break my will, failed to put out the freedom fire burning in my heart. Today, I am ready to engage in political fight with a renewed vigour. And it is in this regard that I would like to clarify certain points for our readers.

Despite the fact that 15 years have passed since the day we proclaimed our independence, not only many key social, economic, political, moral, ethical and national problems have not been resolved, they have ever since aggravated even further.¹⁰

Evidently, on the whole, Hummatov is positioning himself as one of the leaders of a higher, all-Azeri, scale. It seems that posts by regular

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Talishi users discussing national problems in online forums are more illustrative of the position of the Talishi Movement, especially on the political issues the movement is facing. On the one hand, the users post under aliases, or screen names, which allows them enough anonymity to speak their minds. On the other, based on our nearly two-year long study of the online discussions, we can safely assume that the keynote users are the active members of the Talishi Diaspora and the movement, middle-aged people with considerable life experience, i.e. witnesses and maybe even participants of the events of the late 1980s-early 1990s, therefore the opinions they express may be considered representative of the position of the Talishi leadership aiming at expanding the scope of the nationalist movement. Noteworthy, in our judgment, during the two years of discussion, a consensus regarding the overall concept of the national and political objectives has been more or less reached. Overall, it is the demand for autonomy, comparable with that of Nakhichevan, and—more cautiously—with the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The wording of these demands for autonomy varies within the range of moderate and cautious to more blatant and radical. Here is an example of a moderate wording taken from online discussions in the *www.azdiaspora.org* forum:

If the state starts implementing concrete steps towards cultural autonomy and economic well-being of the Talishi region, the issue of territorial autonomy may as well be dropped.¹¹

As an example of a radical wording the following quote can be viewed:

Should we look at the problem through more or less professional eyes, we'll see that there are only two ways to solve it once and for all: 1) full sovereignty; 2) territorial and administrative autonomy, that is self-governance. The first one is the best possible solution (no political ulterior motive here, believe me), while the second way is a compromise solution, which comes with a certain element of risk. I hope that we will be able to find a compromise solution and not lose our ties with Azerbaijan, as it won't be in our interests.¹²

Flanked by these two positions is a set of objectives formulated across a broader spectrum by one of the more active members of the forum during a recent online discussion there:

I believe, it is about time to clearly state that our aim is territorial, economic and cultural autonomy! We either come to power in the

¹¹ <http://www.azdiaspora.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=44&st=20>

¹² *Ibid.*

Republic of Azerbaijan or achieve territorial autonomy for ourselves. There is no other way about it. With that in mind, I have concluded that the Talishi Movement should strive to achieve territorial, economic and cultural autonomy with broad authority. To achieve that we should:

- 1) Restore the importance of the Talishi language and give it a de-facto status of the principle means of communication and on information exchange channel throughout the entire region and among the representatives of the Talishi people all over the world;
- 2) Find appropriate methods of developing Talishi national business groups supporting the renaissance of the nation, as there is no national support without bourgeoisie or middle-class;
- 3) Create a powerful ideological basis and resources to support and promote the national idea;
- 4) Create effective mechanisms to help Talishis resist assimilation and compensate for economic dependence on domestic and foreign factors.¹³

With this opinion agrees another active member of the forum with two years of online posting under his belt:

I totally agree and, therefore, find any kind of misunderstandings and squabble unacceptable here. Our aim has been articulated quite clearly. All we need to do is to agree as to what the plan of practical steps will be. All the rest is just a waste of time and beating around the bush.¹⁴

Thus, we conclude that the demand for autonomy—from cultural to territorial—is, in fact, a consensus wording, acceptable for the people, who constitute what can be labeled as the emerging Talishi elite.

Ethno-cultural Stereotypes of the Talishis

In addition to political content, the Talishi online sources also contain very remarkable material enabling the visitor to observe almost in real time the process of building of a contemporary national identity.

These are such topics as the formation of literary language and the alphabet, the carving of the official history and the building of a Hall of Fame for “the historical heroes of our people”, etc., which we will attempt to examine in greater detail, basing our judgment on online discussions in the above-mentioned forums (*www.azdiaspora.org*, *www.talishica.org*), as well as respective sections of the Talishi-related websites.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The fact that the prevailing discussion topics pertain to the formation of literary language and the alphabet, the shaping of the perception of the Talishi history, as well as the guessing of who among the regional prominent figures is/was of the Talishi extraction, clearly points at a rapid process of forging national identity. The preponderance of the above topics in the discussion indicates that we are already witnessing advanced stages of that process. Besides, the emergence in 1993 of the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijan Republic, despite the short span of its existence, has left a deep imprint in the psyche of Talishis, thus having become the key element of their national outlook. The most important details of this national event serve as a sacred precedent of a heroic fight, the crown achievement of which had become the declaration of independence, a sort of reference point, “the beginning of Creation”, *le mythe de l'éternel retour* as termed by Mircea Eliade. As it would hardly be possible to forge and substantiate a national identity without an underlying set of the “heroic war” and “freedom fight” myths, it would be redundant to explain how important that precedent is for the Talishi Movement. Consequently, while being quite reasonable on other issues, Talishis react very strongly to any criticism of whether the events related to the Talish Mughan Republic or its leader, Ali Akram Hummatov.

In the context of building national identity, we have also studied ethnic stereotypes of Talishis as they transpire in online discussions. Actually, the entire data on the hetero-stereotypes of Talishis, collected from the Talishi-related sources, belongs to the Turks, the Turkic world. Talishis themselves also use the term “Turk-Mongols”. In this context, the term “Turks” encompasses a broad range of connotations, apparently covering the entire Turkic-speaking world, while, in a more narrow sense, this term can be used in online discussions to imply the Turkic ancestors of contemporary Azeris. There appears to be much fewer auto-stereotypes than hetero-stereotypes. Those that we have found can be divided into two groups. The auto-stereotypes in the first group are, in fact, antonyms of the hetero-stereotypes being used to describe the “Turks”. The second group of auto-stereotypes is typical, in our opinion, of an ethnos on a certain stage of the development of national consolidation.

The use of the term “Turko-Mongols” in reference to the Turkic-speaking population of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic is also quite interesting. According to the data collected from online forums, the main exclusive hetero-stereotypes commonly used by Talishis while referring to the Turks are the following:

The Turks “must be blamed for the demise of Azerbaijan and Caucasian Albania”; they are “nomads with no culture”, as well as “destructors” and “aliens”.

Evidently, all these definitions can be easily combined into a single stereotype couples, in other words, here we are dealing with different versions of the same basic hetero-stereotype, which describes the Turks as hostile nomads, aliens without their own culture.

Analogy with the Armenian stereotypes about the Turks is obvious. Similar hetero-stereotypes in reference to Turks are also common among the Georgians, Iranians, Tajiks, and Zazas.¹⁵

As far as the auto-stereotypes are concerned, they can be broken down into two categories. The first category contains the following definitions of Talishis: “the native population of Azerbaijan”, “the masters of Azerbaijan”, as well as “the most ancient people in the region”.

It seems that this group of auto-stereotypes too can be easily upgraded into one unified auto-stereotype, according to which “We” are an “ancient, native people” and, therefore, the “masters” of the land. This category of stereotypes also fully correlates with the Armenian and Georgian models of self-identification. Some analogies can be seen with the modern Azeri model of self-identification, which, based on our observations, is still in the stage of development. With the Azeri model the Talishi stereotype has a reverse correlation, whereby the “Autochthon Azeris” stereotype is replaced with the “Autochthon Talishis/alien Turks”.

The two stereotype groups presented above are in clear opposition to each other. The division line runs along the notion pairs: “nomads/settled population”, “aliens/autochthones”, “ancient civilisation/ destroyers of culture”, etc. We can apparently assert that the image of a hostile alien in the Talishi psyche is being formed, based on their hetero-stereotypes about the Turks. Although the existing data are insufficient to substantiate the assumption that Talishis have a definite “adversary image”, it is quite evident that “the Turk” is a strong contender for that title. At the same time, it must be noted that presently “the Turks” should not be associated with “the Turkic-speaking Azeris”, because, according to the forum data, the latter are conceived more along the lines of the “assimilated Talishis”, with the Talishis themselves being “the real Azeris”. The hostile Turk is more an ab-

¹⁵ See G. Asatrian, “Nekotorye voprosy tradicionnogo mirovozzreniya zaza”, *Tradicionnoe mirovozzrenie u narodov Perednej Azii*, Moscow, 1992: 104-105.

stract model rather than the real ethnos. This model tends to be more associated with Turkey and pan-Turkism, and is to a lesser degree personified by the “Turkish-Azeris”.

The binary contrast between the hetero-stereotypes and the auto-stereotypes in the first group actually forms the basic dynamics of the developing Talishi identity.

The second category of the identified stereotypes contains the following expressions: “Everyone else has woken up, except for us”, “we, Talishis, have always been extremely apolitical”, “we are not Ossetians, nor Abkhazians, as we have different mentality”, “nationalism of the ‘Talish for Talishis’ type is genetically foreign to us. We, Talishis, have still remained cosmopolitan adherents of Neo-Platonic (sic!) values”, “we are black sheep in the world of raging nationalism”, and so forth.

The second group portrays Talishis as a lethargic, apolitical, passive ethnos, devoid of a nationalistic aspect. The dualism of such self-identification is evident: on the one hand Talishis are being presented as a nation that follows the footsteps of humanitarian, international (even “Neo-Platonic”) traditions, while on the other, calls are being made to break away from that label, discarding it as irrelevant in the new world order. Equally remarkable is how Talishis put themselves against other nations, in particular peoples of the region: “we are not Ossetians, nor Abkhazians”. The association chain points toward the author’s apparent intention to continue with “or Armenians” (note that the chain names the nations, which managed to extract their ethnic autonomies from the former Soviet republics, in which they had previously been contained), but, perhaps, found it politically incorrect.

In our view, this group of auto-stereotypes is typical exactly of nations at a certain stage of the formation of the national self-awareness and modern nationalism, if you will. Such metaphors as the “sleeping Motherland”, the “drowsy people”, the “international people”, the “humanistic people” amidst nationalistically-minded neighbours, the people “unaware of its history and its heroes”, are to a certain extent *clichés* generally present in any ethnicity at a particular stage of national consolidation, usually during periods of transition or crisis.

A fresh example of generous use of an analogous auto-stereotype can be found in Azerbaijani self-description. According to a widely held Azeri auto-stereotype, Azeris are hospitable cosmopolitan people, who had been deceived by their treacherous nationalistic neighbours (Armenians, first and foremost), and only “awoke” from their lethargic peacefulness as a result of such deceit. However, the “awakening”

process is not considered complete yet. Apparently, based on the current stage of national identity building, Azeris should be viewed as the closest nation to Talishis, which is hardly surprising, given the integration level of the Talishi ethnos into the Azeri society.

We can, of course, go beyond the regional context and recall that the metaphor of a “sleeping” or “awakening” people was just as common among European nations during the period when modern nationalism and national self-consciousness were being formed. The slogans “Wake up France” (or Italy, Hungary, the Slavs, etc. for that matter) became known during the events of the 19th century related to the process of modernisation and the collapse of the old forms of statehood when the medieval principles of universality were giving way to new, nationalist concepts.

A variety of this motive in the Talishi context can be found in the following quote about the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijani Republic leader Ali Akram Hummatov:

He has really revolutionised the minds of our fellow Talishis and let us feel, albeit for a short time, like free people, and by doing so he has changed lives of many compatriots! For many of us all became clear in this world. He made us revolutionaries. Overnight, many Talishis realised that people only become slaves when they agree to that; by simply not wanting to become a slave, by just being able to say no a person becomes free. He has taught us how to say the wonderful word freedom.¹⁶

Although the word “awakening” *per se* is not used here, the context certainly fits in the ancient motive of a hero who awakens the “sleeping beauty”—the Motherland.

Also of interest is another quote from the same text:

I have no doubt that at this moment a generation of real “Rebel-Hummatovians” is growing up in the land of the Talish, who, under his guidance, will bring to a successful end the great quest of liberation of Talishi people started by him.¹⁷

The metaphor of the upcoming generation of young rebels, or the new generation of heroes, is also characteristic of the frame of collective ethnic self-awareness and is just as cliché as is the sleeping Motherland metaphor. The generation of young heroes in such a model usually follows the footsteps of the Lead Hero, the Chief, akin to the young warriors in the Vedas—the Maruts, companions of Indra.

¹⁶ <http://www.talinf.4t.com/TIA-RUS/aboru.html>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The Building of History. The Basic Structural Components of the Model ("The Misplaced Genocide")

Having taken into account the fact that the formation of a modern national self-consciousness has reached certain stage, it would be logical to assume that Talishis are undergoing a rapid process of building their own history.

It is evident from forum discussions that the process of building national history progresses along the lines of a certain predisposed and typologically familiar model. The basic structural components of such a model are typologically comparable with other models of national histories, at least those of the neighbour nations. Within the framework of the structural components of a model like that, some ritual expressions and phrases can also be singled out, which have an autonomous, evocative function independent of the specific historical content (the word history being used here both in the connotation of historical science, and as a synonym of the words story, narrative).

Besides, the connection of the developing model of national history with the core auto-stereotype, as well as with the fundamental conflict within the opposition frame along the auto-stereotype/hetero-stereotype can be clearly seen here.

The main keywords, which, in our opinion, serve as the source structural components, generally preceding concrete content, are as follows: 1) "ancientness" (the nation and its history being ancient); 2) "autochthony"; 3) "culturedness" ("creators of culture", "bearers of culture", "disseminators of culture", "custodians and guardians of culture").

We have observed that these three concepts make up the core content of Talishi auto-stereotypes. They also comprise the specified group of the key structural components of the core model, around which the narrative of national history unfolds. The third concept ("culturedness"), in its own turn can be further subdivided into 3-4 modules, given below in parentheses.

Thus, while the first two concepts delineate the static of the model, the third one, due to its component modules does define the transition towards the dynamics (to bear, preserve and guard culture).

To these three components of national history, which on the whole concur with the basic integrated auto-stereotype, we can add another two: heroism (fight) and struggle (long suffering).

Accounting also for the function of the bearer of culture, these two components together compose the main axis of the dynamic compo-

nent of the model, which receives its complete representation upon introducing into the model *the image of the enemy* (possibly, another module), which, in all its attributes, goes up against the main character of the story.

Symbolically, the first one has an obvious modality in the narration dynamics, while the second one is passive. We have not come across a verbatim articulation of the concept of long suffering in our study, although the “Genocide concept” appears to exist outside the online forums.¹⁸ Admittedly, the latter has still not been chronologically anchored, and is yet to be narrated in full detail, with relevant victim statistics, which, incidentally, leads to the assumption that the structural components of the model for the most part precede the actual populating of it with concrete content, be it historically accurate or mythologised.

In our opinion, all these components not only stem from actual facts of national history, but in most cases, come before them as shape-forming layouts. Confirming this assertion is a practically absolute concurrence of the aforesaid components with similar concepts familiar from the history models of at least peoples in the Caucasus region (let alone a wider range of associations and analogies, which would have certainly been examined in a larger-scale study).

Here again, as in the case with auto- and hetero-stereotypes, the analogy with the oldest and more or less complete history models, such as the Armenian and the Georgian ones, arises. The concepts of ancientness, being autochthonous, being cultured (with all its sub-modules), of heroic fight, and struggle are quite familiar from these models. Overall, this very model is being used as a paradigm for their national histories by Kurds,¹⁹ Assyrians, and Azerbaijanis among others. Of these, first the Azeri and, perhaps, also the Kurdish models are the ones influencing the Talishi model. The Azeri model displays the same concepts of ancientness, being autochthonic (the Turkic orientation of this model does not get in the way of this concept—the Turks are simply being proclaimed the autochthonous people of the region), culturedness, struggle and fight. Remarkably, in the models of their neighbours, the Azeris as a Turkic-speaking people are portrayed as bearers of the exact opposite concepts. Although with some consider-

¹⁸ The link to that quote on one of the Talishi sites has not been working for some time now, as the site is apparently in the process of redesign and update: <http://www.talinf.4t.com/TIA-RUS/genru.html>

¹⁹ See G. Asatrian, “Postulaty kurdovedeniya”, *G. Asatrian, Etyudy po iranskoj etnologii*, Erevan, 1998: 62-65.

able deviations, the Talishi model, in particular, essentially leans towards that variant.

Besides, within the process of exposing the structural components that precede the actual populating of the model it is important to highlight the almost ritual idiom about the necessity of "revealing the real, objective history". The context of this phrase suggests that there exists a genuine, undistorted history waiting to be uncovered and presented to the world at any cost. Any ritual has as its purpose an action aimed at a revival, a return of the original "genuine" state, which was distorted due to various factors, such as, for instance, the evil acts of some global villains. Therefore, the phrase "necessity of revealing the real, objective history", despite sounding pretentiously scientific, is in fact, nothing but a ritual idiom containing in its structure the basic skeleton of a ritual act.

Because of their ritual nature, phrases like this one can be also included in the set of structural components of a model being build. In this context, also significant is the stressing of the functional role of history, or, rather, that of the genuine, objective history, which needs to be found. Here, a clearly realised connection of the "revealing of the real history" with the objectives of a nationalistic political struggle, which by and in itself is a contradiction in terms between historical objectivity and the functional role of history.

With all the above in mind we preliminarily assume the existence of specific structure-forming components of a model of the national history, which as a form habitually precede the factual content of history. Confirming this assertion is the presence in the models of the neighbouring nations of equivalent hypothetical components, as well as the specific example of the "Genocide of the Talishi people" (as a module and simultaneously the climatic point of the concept of struggle and suffering), still lacking a chronological anchor and a coherent narration. The concept of the "Genocide of the Talishis" is floating in the air awaiting an actual historical ground to be found to base it upon (possible localisation options may traditionally be 1918-1919 or 1993).

If we try to single out of all the structure-forming concepts one key narrative, of which all others are derivative, it would most likely be the concept of ancientness and its next of kin, the concept of being autochthonic. All the rest stem one way or another from the key narrative, which concurs also with the main auto-stereotype of the first group. Thus, the concept of culturedness quite evidently has its origins in the concepts of being "ancient", "autochthon" and "native"; while the concept of fight in its turn develops from the concept of being the

bearer, the guardian and the defender of culturedness with suffering being the result of the said struggle. Apparently, “ancientness” is the keyword for defining and creating any model of national history building in this region. To this key notion arises the entire set of concepts. Also evident here is the influence of mythopoetic and ritual models, which link being ancient, close to the origins with ingenuity, proximity to the primordial good, etc.

Iranian Identity and Median Concept of the History of Azerbaijan as Reflected in Talishi National History

Beside the structure-forming details, there is a less abstract premise preceding the factual populating of the national history model. That premise is the Iranian identity of Talishis and the resultant political and civilization orientation. Also, as a convenient material for the construction of national history is the so-called concept of Igrar Aliyev, a recurring topic in online forums. As it is known, in the Soviet period, two or three concepts of national history were formed in Azerbaijan. One of them focused on the Albanian, Caucasian origin of Azeris, another was built on the Iranian, Median premise. Since the early 1990s, the third—Turkic—concept has been rapidly developing.

The Iranian concept maintains that Azeris are essentially the descendants and successors of the Northern Iranian peoples, the Medians, first and foremost, and hence are the bearers of cultural values created by these peoples. Obviously, a concept like this would perfectly fit Talishis. On the one hand, it allows to use an already developed model by simply substituting the *Azeris* with the *Talishis*, while on the other, it portrays Talishis as authentic Azeris, or the real landlords of Azerbaijan, while presenting the Turkic-speaking population either as the assimilated Talishis, or barbaric new-comers.

The identification with the Iranian world and Iranian cultural and historical heritage gives Talishis additional psychological support, as well as further arguments to uphold their model of national history and, within the said model, to distance themselves from the alien “Turko-Mongols”.

List of Ancestor-Nations

The list of the ancestor-nations of the Talishis is given in the context of the Iranian model of history of Azerbaijan. The list contains peoples in ancient times populating Media, Atropathena and the area of the pre-

sent-day Azerbaijan Republic. Some of these people were Iranian-speaking, and some have been presumed to speak the autochthonous languages of the region. While occasionally these peoples are listed as forebears of Talishis, they are sometimes directly identified with them as “ancient Talishis”.

Among the ancestor-nations, or ancient nations, with whom the contemporary Talishis are being identified, are: Magi, Caspians, Kadusians, Scythians, Medians, and Azaris (with the Iranian *-a-* instead of the Turkic *-e-*), i.e. the inhabitants of ancient and medieval Aturpātākān.

These ethnonyms are sometimes listed in a chronological sequence as different designations of the same nation in various periods of history. Thus the chain of history from the Talishis of ancient Media to the Talishis of modern day Azerbaijan is closed.

While the Median theory basically recycles, with some suitable modifications, the theory of Igrar Aliyev about the origin of the Azerbaijanis, the surfacing of the “Azaris” is a more recent occurrence. The Iranian language Azari existed in the territory of the present-day Azarbāijān province in Iran (ancient Aturpātākān), but in the late Middle Ages was displaced by Turkic dialects. The Turkic-speaking inhabitants of this area are essentially the descendants of the native Azari speakers.²⁰ In fact, this native Azari-speaking people, conventionally called Azaris or Azarbāijānis, are viewed by Talishis as part of their direct ancestry. Thus, the Azari people have become the missing link in the chain of history connecting the ancient Medians with the contemporary Talishis.

The Azari origin receives a remarkably extended interpretation, as the term Azari is actually being archaicised and extrapolated upon on all nations in the Talishi list of ancestors. In doing so, Talishis interpret the ethnonym Azari itself as a term connoting the belonging to the Zoroastrian religion and trumpet the Azari people as the most original and authentic bearers of Zoroastrianism. Furthermore, from the ethnonym Azari Talishis coined the new term Azarism and declared it a synonym to the word Zoroastrianism.

²⁰ For details, see G. Asatrian, “Suščestvuyet li narod azari?”, *G. Asatrian, Etyudy po iranskoj etnologii*, Erevan, 1998: 25-33.

List of National Heroes

Along with the list of ancestor nations, a preliminary list of national historical heroes can be composed. This precursor pantheon of sorts is still under construction within the defined model of history.

The prophet Zardusht (Zoroaster) opens the list, which, based on the data available to us, contains the following names of regional historical figures, somehow rediscovered as the “famous Talishis”: 1. Zardusht, 2. Babek (Babak Khurram-din), 3. Nizami Ganjavi, 4. Shaikh Safi Ardabili, 5. Shah Ismai’l, 6. Khan Mir Mustafa, the Khan of Talish, 7. Mir Hasan, the Khan of Talish, and 8. Ali Akram Hummatov.

Notably, it appears as if the list is metaphorically divided in two parts. One part lists names of men of distinction, which can be positively and undeniably identified as being of Talishi extraction (two Khans of Talish and President of the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijani Republic Ali Akram Hummatov). The other part contains names (from 1 to 5) of historical figures of Iranian origin, which have either been believed to exist (Zoroaster), or reliably documented to either act or come from the area of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan and Azarbāijān proper. In fact, this part of the list simply duplicates the roster of ethnically Iranian national and historical dignitaries that the Azerbaijanis had compiled for themselves. On the other hand, this part of the list can potentially be expanded as needed to make room for all historical figures of Iranian extractions who ever lived in the aforesaid areas.

The inclusion of the leader of the Talishi Movement Ali Akram Hummatov in the list is quite remarkable. First, let us cite a few short excerpts from the already sacred passage (partly cited above) about him—a fixture of many Talishi web sites, and the forums, in particular:

He is intelligent, yet naïve; courageous, yet gullible; a patriot, who has not been appreciated in his own land; an unsung hero; an individualist surrounded by people scared to death to assume any responsibility. He is a warrior, with only cowards and cowardice around him; he is bright and unassuming, but in his native fatherland, he is not appreciated. His mind is preoccupied solely with concerns about his people, but people around him are only concerned with their own issues; he is freedom-loving and a rebel, with only slaves and slavery around him—in other words, he is a true son of his people, he is a Talishi. At the end of the 20th century, first among the Talishis, he led an uprising to liberate his dying people and let the whole world know that before long the word Talishi will only be found in the Red Book of Endangered Species of History. He has really revolutionised the minds of

our fellow Talishis and let us feel, albeit for a short time, like free people, and by doing so he has changed lives of many compatriots! For many of us all became clear in this world. He made us revolutionaries. Overnight, many Talishis realised that people only become slaves when they agree to that; by simply not wanting to become a slave, by just being able to say no a person becomes free. He has taught us how to say the wonderful word freedom. I have no doubt that at this moment a generation of real “Rebel-Hummatovians” is growing up in the land of the Talish, who, under his guidance, will bring to a successful end the great quest of liberation of Talishi people started by him.²¹

Just this short (compared with the original passage) quote from the text about Hummatov, is illustrative enough of the fact that Hummatov combines in himself both the function of an archaic chief with that of an epic hero. The persona of Hummatov is one “non-negotiable” point in web forum discussions, where the Talishi members are not at all likely to concede even an iota to the Turkic-speaking participants of the debates. Adversely, the very same point seems to infuriate the latter the most in their disputes with Talishis. The customarily non-confrontational and generally reasonable Talishis, however, become extremely defensive when it comes to this point. This situation is clearly indicative of the fact that the image (the image rather than the persona, even though Hummatov is still alive) of Hummatov plays symbolic (rather than actual) role in the process of forging the Talishi identity.

Hummatov seems to embody and amalgamate the entire roster of national heroes. As is evident from the above quote, he actually combines in himself the images of a warrior, prophet, a future teller, a fighter for freedom leading the uprising, an astute politician, a soldier politician, and a martyr. This is, in effect, the image of a chief, a charismatic leader, and a founding father.

²¹ Also of note in this quote are stylistic archaism, orientalism, pre-modernism, mythologism, or, to put even more accurately, archaic modernism. It is as if this were not a description of a contemporary politician, but, rather, an ancient prophet, or a chieftain. If we look deeper, though, we would see that in this particular case we not so much have a traditional Muslim Padishah or Khan, but, rather, a sort of Patriarch of the nation, depicted in a style, which can be loosely called archaic or early-modern, typical of the early stages of the formation of national identity. Characteristically of that phase, scores of seemingly incompatible factors, such as mythologism, romanticism, nationalism, archaism, modernism, traditionalism, coquetry of a chieftain, primitivism (even in comparison with the pre-modern stage), and so on, are fused together. This fusion does not produce just ordinary oriental flattery, nor a simple recycled tradition, but modern oriental adulation with elements of ritual incantation.

It looks like the list is a symbolic span of all possible idols, from the semi-legendary founder, the cultural champion, and prophet, up to the actual leader of the national movement, the new visionary, and the "founding father". The number one in the list and the one at the very bottom of it are the contenders for the title of the "Greatest Talishi" of all.

Conclusion

The Talishi Movement, therefore, can on the whole be considered a real national development. There is a definite consensus among the advancing Talishi national leadership on certain basic issues, such as the national and political objectives of the movement, the subject of a leader, the interpretation of key events of the modern history, for instance, the proclamation in 1993 of the Talish-Mughan Azerbaijani Republic, and so on. A tendency towards an agreement on general issues of national history can also be observed. Similarly, issues pertaining to literary language, the alphabet, etc., despite the lingering debates, seem to be drifting towards a final solution.

Today already, the Talishi Movement may be considered a factor that has an impact on the entire South Caucasus region, as well as neighbouring areas. Apparently, the influence of this factor will only increase in the future, as the Talishi Movement has already passed the stage of birth and initial development, and seems to be well within the area of irreversibility. It should be noted that, in our view, greatly contributing to the solidification of the Talishi National Movement is the position of the leadership of the Republic of Azerbaijan and most of the Azeri society (with the exclusion of a handful of liberals), which can be best described as extreme denunciation of even moderate demands for cultural autonomy. In an odd way, the Azeri society is trying to pretend that there is no problem at all, while the movement of the Talishis, which on the whole is quite loyal towards the Azeri statehood and, unlike the Armenians, does not demand a full cessation, is being explained in Azerbaijan in a typically Soviet manner along the lines of a conspiracy theory and intrigues by some evil forces. By doing so, the Azeri society, against its better judgement, indirectly contributes to the strengthening of radical sentiments among Talishis.

The further consolidation of the ideology of Turkism in Azerbaijan will continue to facilitate the alienation of not only the Talishis, but other non-Turkic ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, among them Tats, to whom Turkic orientation is simply unacceptable.

The formation of the Talishi Movement will certainly be influencing—as it already does—the shaping of national movements of other ethnic minorities populating Azerbaijan, Lezgis, the Iranian-speaking Tats, etc. We just hope that, unlike many other national movements in and outside the region, these do not result in hostilities and the loss of human life.